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Second language reading instruction in Pakistan

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Abstract

In Pakistan, most advanced academic teaching in post-secondary institutions is carried out with English as the medium of instruction. All the text resources read by students are in English. Thus, the ability to teach English L2 reading impacts all post-secondary learning in Pakistan. This paper reports the results of a survey of 71 English teachers' L2 reading instruction and their beliefs about reading in the six public sector universities in Pakistan. Results indicate that majority of the English teachers, who teach English L2 reading /text materials or language skills courses, still prefer to use traditional methods while teaching English, especially reading.

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1. Introduction

The global spread of English and the current state of affairs in the present day global village have put new demands on the citizens of the world as far as their literacy skills and proficiency in English language are concerned. In addition, citizens of modern societies need to be skilled and fluent readers in order to be successful in their professional and academic careers (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Despite such challenging expectations and the 'universal illiteracy eradication' mandate, the situation of English language teaching, especially second language (L2) reading instruction in Pakistan; can never be considered satisfactory. Concerns have been expressed about the unsatisfactory situation of English language teaching, low English language proficiency, and weak English literacy skills of students in Pakistan. Studies have identified factors responsible for the disappointing situation of English language

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education in Pakistan, but very few are based on some kind of empirical data. Above all, there has been no documentation, until recently, of what English teachers exactly do in the classrooms when they teach English or English texts (Muhammad, 2011). Part of the urgency for examining the role and effectiveness of English L2 reading instruction in Pakistan is that most advanced academic teaching in post-secondary institutions is carried out with English as the medium of instruction and text resources to be read by students are in English. Thus, the ability to teach and read English texts impacts all post-secondary learning in Pakistan (Muhammad, 2011). For this reason, the issue of how English L2 reading is taught and learned and how effectively it is taught and learned is one that goes far beyond typical EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and reaches to the heart of effective academic learning across disciplines.

In view of “universal illiteracy eradication” mandate, high level literacy skills and practices are considered as a global academic norm and essential requirement in educational institutions all over the world. Though the notion of literacy and literacy abilities as well as the importance of promoting literacy abilities is not the same in all societies or educational institutions through the world, individuals need literacy to achieve advanced academic goals and make their lives better (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). The global spread of English and its importance, particularly in multilingual societies; has necessitated that people have a higher level of reading proficiency in order to function well and achieve personal and professional goals in today’s world. Despite such demanding expectations for success, L2 students are not often given much time to develop strong reading abilities (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). This is definitely true of Pakistani English L2 students, especially with regard to L2 reading instruction where reading is seen as an implicit ability that students just pick up. Moreover, an ability to read fluently, much like skilled L1 reading abilities, is considered to be a major end-goal for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and L2 reading instruction (Grabe, 1991). The basic requirement of learning to read is the act of reading. Silent reading has been recommended as an essential part of every reading lesson (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). But, these developmental directions are not found as a goal in most post-secondary educational institutions in Pakistan (Muhammad, 2011). Students are provided with very little or no opportunities to read on their own in English language classrooms or at home in most places in Pakistan. This is a common trend that prevails with a slight variation in government-sponsored institutions.

The need to find out what might be lacking in the teaching of L2 reading in Pakistan resulted in a search for recommended research-based effective practices and classroom implications for L2 reading instruction. Many L2 reading researchers, such as Anderson (1991), Carrell (1984), Grabe (1991, 2004, 2009, 2010), Grabe and Stoller (2001, 2002), Graden (1996), Koda (1994), and Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), have proposed sets of useful ideas and implications from research for L2 reading instruction and curriculum. As many of them were found to have overlapping ideas and details, a consolidated list of 23 relevant and applicable implications or developmental directions and effective practices for L2 reading instruction was prepared as a foundation for the study the results of which are reported in this paper.

2. Literature review

English and Urdu are the official languages of Pakistan, though the status of English as the official language of Pakistan is still controversial (Rahman, 2002). English is taught as a compulsory subject (i.e., a mandatory course) for fourteen years, starting from first grade. However, the situation of English language teaching in Pakistan is not considered satisfactory. Hassan (2009) and Warsi (2004), while discussing the conditions under which English is taught in Pakistan, highlight issues and factors that are responsible for the overall unsatisfactory situation of English language teaching and learning in Pakistan. The factors and issues they identify are as follows: (a) weaknesses in the curriculum, (b) absence of clear

curricular objectives while designing English courses, (c) inexperienced and inefficient teachers, (d) use of defective teaching methods and techniques, (e) inappropriate textbooks, (f) inadequate material facility and unfavorable learning environment, (g) faulty and erroneous examination system, (h) crowded classrooms, (h) no specific reasons to learn or teach English, and (i) lack of library resources and reading materials.

Unlike L2 reading research that informs L2 reading instruction generally (Grabe & Stoller, 2002); L2 reading research in Pakistan is almost nonexistent. As stated earlier, despite the following facts that (a) English is the medium of instruction in all post-secondary institutions in Pakistan, (b) all the text materials that students have to read are in English, and (c) the ability to teach and read English texts impacts all post-secondary learning in Pakistan, it is unfortunate that L2 reading instruction and research have been given little or no explicit attention (Muhammad, 2011). The only two publically available studies, somewhat related to reading instruction in Pakistan, are those of Memon and Badger (2007) and Sultana (2007). The two studies discuss the situation and issues of L2 reading instruction in Pakistan to some extent. But they are not sufficient to present a realistic picture of L2 reading instruction in Pakistan. The report of Memon and Badger (2007) on a new approach of teaching reading (initiated by one of the researchers) and traditional reading classes at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan (USJP) highlights some concerns and issues involving the weak English literacy skills of the students of USJP in particular, and Pakistani students in general. The study points out some deficiencies in the teaching of reading in Pakistan, but it leaves out a number of major issues and questions. The researchers bring to light what goes on in traditional reading instruction classes as far as the roles of the teachers and students are concerned, but they do not clearly explain what teachers actually do while teaching reading. Though likely to be the same, the situation of reading instruction only at the USJP cannot be taken as a true reflection of the teaching of reading in all the public sector universities in Pakistani without empirical data.

Sultana (2007) observes that many inefficient readers enter Pakistani universities, colleges, and careers and face difficulties in any kind of work that involves reading. Her study focuses on some issues that affect the development of L2 reading skills in Pakistan such as the lack of awareness by English reading teachers about the importance of reading and reading instruction models. But she has only explored these issues at the school and college levels and she draws on a very limited data (38 teachers only in two urban cities). Her study also does not reflect the classroom instructional practices used by of English reading teachers.

To this point, I have reviewed the minimal research published on English language teaching and more specifically on L2 reading instruction in Pakistan and briefly highlighted a number of issues that were examined more carefully and in great detail in Muhammad's study (2011). Until recently, there had been no documentation of what university English teachers actually do when they teach text materials/English L2 reading and/or those courses that aim at developing students' language skills in Pakistan and what beliefs do they have about reading. In addition to two other research questions that are beyond the scope of the present discussion, the study asked the following two specific research questions:

- What are the common beliefs about reading of Pakistani public sector university English teachers who teach English reading and English text-related courses?
- What are the self-reported classroom instructional practices of Pakistani public sector university English teachers who teach English reading and English text-related courses?

3. Methodology

The focus of the study was to explore the reading beliefs and classroom instructional practices of English teachers in public sector universities in Pakistan. I used a mixed-method research design. This specific research design was followed because the study involved both qualitative data (obtained through open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire and telephone/Skype interviews) and quantitative/numerical data. For data collection, a survey questionnaire that contained 31 items (thirty 6-point Likert-scaled items and 1 open-ended question) was developed. In addition, there were also fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice type questions for collecting certain necessary demographic information. The survey was mailed and self-administered. All participant responses, using different data collection tools, were collected and analyzed in order to present a realistic description of L2 reading instruction in Pakistan.

3.1. Participants

For the selection of the participants, non-random, purposive, and convenience sampling procedures were used. The participants of the study were 71 English teachers in the departments of English in six selected public sector universities of Pakistan whose responses were mailed back to me by my professors and colleagues who were either administrators or chairpersons of the departments of English in different regions of Pakistan (Multan, Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa, Islamabad, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir). Those administrators and chairpersons distributed the survey questionnaires among their colleagues.

3.2. Instrument

Work on development of the survey questionnaire started with a search for online and published L2 reading survey research and studies investigating teachers' beliefs and practices in ESL or EFL contexts. The following studies were identified: DeFord (1985), Graden (1996), Johnson (1992), Lee (1986), Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), Pressley, Yokoi, Rankin, Wharton-McDonald, and Mistretta (1997), and Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, and Lloyd (1991) and found to be useful in the sense that they provided options for design as well as suggested a converging understanding as to what is important in reading and reading research, but none of them were found to be specifically relevant in Pakistani context. It was the question of the validity of the surveys for a Pakistani context, more than anything else; which guided the decision not to use any of the instruments that had been used in the above-stated studies. Part A of the questionnaire consisted of 20 beliefs statements. Part B included 10 practice statements. All 30 items were 6-point Likert scaled items. Keeping in mind relevant categories and common observations, 5 points were not used because the mid-point often forces respondents to make it a choice and 4 categories were not used because they force respondents away from the middle point (Fink, 2009). Using SPSS 19, available online for use to all students at the Northern Arizona University, USA; the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for all the 30 Likert scaled items was computed. Alpha was found to be .69. Because this instrument was central to the data collection and subsequent analysis, it was important to validate as carefully as possible the final version of the instrument through a multi-step validation process: (a) a careful review of current L2 reading research was carried out and a consolidated list of 23 instructional practices was prepared, (b) discussions with my research advisor resulted in iterative adaptations to the questionnaire, (c) information collected from six teachers (two high school, two college, and two university) in Pakistan led to questionnaire revisions, (d) responses of two students studying at Northern Arizona University (NAU) and one student at Carleton University Ottawa, Ontario, Canada after they filled out the questionnaire led to changes, (e) feedback from 10 university teachers in

Pakistan (from the same data collection sites) led to further revisions, and (f) discussions with an expert informant from Pakistan at NAU.

3.3. Procedures used for data collection and data analysis

I collected data from those English teachers who were teaching reading/English text or those courses that aimed at developing students' language proficiency and skills. They were all teaching in the departments of English at six public sector universities in different regions of Pakistan. I mailed one hundred survey questionnaires to my professors and colleagues (already identified) who then distributed them among their colleagues. Out of the total 100 questionnaires, 50 were mailed to five English departments in five universities (to be referred to as five other public sector universities) according to the number of teachers in each of these departments. Fifty questionnaires were mailed to the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, to be referred to as language pedagogy university. The surveys were self-administered. All the survey questionnaires were anonymous, but identification coded for later use. In total, 71 respondents (35 from the language pedagogy university and 36 from other five public sector universities) completed the questionnaires and mailed back to me in sealed envelopes.

Using a codebook, responses of all the respondents were recorded and compiled separately in different Excel files and sheets. All 20 items in Part A and Part B were assigned a specific name/label to make each one of them a variable. For example, items 1 through 20 on Part A (Beliefs) were named as B1–B20 (B represents "Belief" and the number represents the item number in Part A of the questionnaire) and items 1 through 10 on Part B (Practices) as P1–P10 (P represents "Practice" and the number represent the item number in Part B of the questionnaire). Responses to the one open-ended type of question were also compiled (beyond the scope of the present paper). All Excel files were converted into SPSS 19 (IBM) for analysis. Descriptive statistics were run before any of the subsequent analyses to check normality of data. The data sets were analyzed in light of the research questions using frequencies and descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations). A mix of summary narrative and visual displays with some numerical data methods were used for the description and discussion of results and findings.

4. Results

The study had actually four questions. The first two research questions that the study asked concerned the common reading beliefs and instructional practices of English teachers in the public sector universities in Pakistan. The last two questions examined ways to relate participants' responses to larger trends in the questionnaire data, which will not be discussed because they are beyond the scope of the present discussion. Results in response to each of the first 2 questions one at a time will be presented in the following paragraphs.

Frequencies, Means (M), and Standard Deviations (SD) of all the 30 Likert scale items were analyzed to explore the common beliefs about reading of Pakistani public sector university English teachers who teach English reading and English text-related courses. To highlight results from participant responses to the questionnaire and organize their responses, percentages were calculated and sets of responses were grouped in relation to the frequencies calculated. In order to be able to see patterns in the responses, I organized responses according to a set of decision criteria. First, to identify items for which a larger number of the teachers strongly agreed, I took 20% or more "strongly agree" as a cutoff percentage. As

Table 1 indicates, eight items (B1, B9, B15-B20) were found for which 20% or more of the teachers strongly agreed.

Table 1. Mean scores (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and frequencies of participants' responses to beliefs statements

	Items Description	M (SD)	Scale and Percentages					
			1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	6 %
B1	Need of developing reading skills of Pakistani students	5.37 (.74)	0	0	3	7	41	49
B2	Reading the text aloud and explanation only in English	4.45 (1.09)	3	4	7	27	49	10
B3	Reading the text aloud and explanation both in English and a local language	3.97 (1.23)	4	9	17	35	27	9
B4	Reading not the most important skill	2.96 (1.46)	20	25	16	21	16	3
B5	Teaching how to read for the development of all reading skills	4.56 (1.07)	1	4	9	24	47	16
B6	Helping students to be fluent readers	4.61 (.80)	0	1	4	38	45	11
B7	Intensive reading or extensive reading	2.24 (1.03)	0	10	9	35	41	6
B8	Grammar analysis for reading development	3.79 (1.27)	4	14	18	32	24	7
B9	Helping learners synthesize, evaluate, and selectively use information from texts	4.97 (.84)	0	0	4	24	42	30
B10	Need of understanding the content of every paragraph	4.35 (1.09)	0	9	11	28	41	11
B11	Telling students about the goals for a reading task	4.75 (.87)	0	1	6	28	47	18
B12	Sentence by sentence text analysis	3.80 (1.20)	1	16	21	32	23	7
B13	Reading fluency after teaching how to read	4.35 (.97)	0	3	17	32	38	10
B15	Assisting students to use reading strategies	4.97 (.69)	0	0	1	21	56	21
B16	Teaching reading skills with other language skills	5.01 (.87)	0	0	4	24	38	34
B17	Repeated reading improves reading rate, comprehension, and fluency	5.01 (.76)	0	0	1	24	47	28
B18	Knowledge of comprehension processes	5.08 (.84)	0	0	1	27	34	38
B19	Reading instruction and vocabulary development	4.93 (.79)	0	0	1	31	41	27
B20	Discourse structure and discourse signalling features	5.00 (.84)	0	0	3	27	38	32

Note. Percent values in fractions have been rounded to the nearest decimals. On scale, 1 = Strongly disagree and 6 = Strongly agree. Black color 20%, blue 60%, and red color 90% criteria.

I then used 60% as the cut-off percentage for teachers who “moderately and strongly” agreed. Eleven items (B1, B5, B9, B11, B14-B20) were found to which 60% or more teachers strongly agreed or agreed. Not a single item was found to which 60% or more teachers strongly disagreed or disagreed. To look at the number of items at any level of agreement or disagreement (e.g., “somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree”), I used the cutoff point of 90%. When looked at this way, there were 11 items (B1, B6, B9, B11, B14 to B20) to which 90% or more teachers reasonably agreed, in other words, almost everyone agreed.

To answer the question regarding the self-reported classroom instructional practices of Pakistani public sector university English teachers while teaching English reading and English text-related courses, the same procedure, used to answer the first research question, was used. However, as can be seen from the information in Table 2, not a single practice was found to have been reported by teachers as “always” or

Table 2. Mean Scores (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and frequencies of participants’ responses to practice statements

	Items Description	M (SD)	Scale and Percentages					
			1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	6 %
P1	Read the text aloud and explain in English	2.97 (1.36)	6	6	25	21	28	14
P2	Read the text aloud and translate often in English, sometimes in a native language	3.49 (1.33)	4	21	27	24	16	9
P3	Ask students to read the text silently and give a purpose for reading	3.56 (1.22)	1	21	39	16	16	7
P4	Ask students to read orally, check their comprehension by asking oral questions	3.17 (1.28)	3	16	20	28	25	9
P5	Use a pre-reading activity	3.58 (1.54)	9	25	21	21	9	16
P6	Teach how to synthesize, evaluate, and selectively use information	3.56 (1.71)	17	21	13	11	27	11
P7	Teach all the important skills used in reading	3.30 (1.26)	1	17	31	20	23	9
P8	Practice in sustained silent reading and timed reading	3.82 (1.11)	6	20	41	20	13	1
P9	Train students in multiple reading strategies	3.48 (1.29)	3	18	37	18	14	10
P10	Teach vocabulary and help in strategies for independent word leaning	3.58 (1.43)	6	24	30	16	14	11

Note. On the actual scale of questionnaire 1 = Always and 6 = Never. Scale has been revised for analysis here, 1= Never and 6= Always. Percent values in fractions have been rounded. Black color 10%, blue 30%, and red 60% criteria.

“never” practiced. Because I wanted to identify patterns of practices, I adjusted the criterion and lowered the cut off percentages (i.e., from 20% or more to 10% or more of responses for “never” or “always,” from 60% or more of responses for “never and almost never” to 30% or more, from 90% or more of responses for any positive level or any minimal level of practice to 60%). When looked at this way, there is only 1 item or practice (P6) that 10% or more teachers never practice as indicated in Table 2. On the other hand, there are 5 items/practices (P1, P5, P6, P9, and P10) that 10% or more teachers always practice. Moreover, there are 3 items/practices (P5, P6, and P10) that 30% or more teachers never and almost never practice, whereas 4 items/practices (P1, P4, P6, and P7) are practiced always or almost always by 30% or more teachers. Interestingly, there are only 3 items/practices (P3, P8, and P10) that are not practiced or only practiced minimally (never, almost never, and sometimes) by 60% or more teachers, and only 2 items/practices (P1, and P4) that 60% or more teachers positively practice at any level (i.e., always, almost always, and often).

5. Discussion

The analysis of participant responses about their reading beliefs indicates that a majority of the teachers (60% or more) either “strongly agree” or “agree” with eleven L2 reading instructional goals and developmental directions that are recommended by L2 reading researchers. However, using the same criteria, the analysis of the participant responses about their teaching practices in classrooms indicates a different set of views from what they reported about their reading beliefs. There is not a single practice, associated with beliefs about reading, that 60% or more teachers “always” or “almost always” practice in the classroom. But with slightly different criteria, very few teachers (30% or more) always or almost always engage in only 4 practices (contained in statements P1, P4, P6, and P7) out of the total 10 practices. What turns out to be the most surprising is that 60% or more teachers positively engage in only 2 practices (P1 and P4) at any level (i.e., always, almost always, and often).

Eleven items (i.e., B1, B5, B9, B11, and B14-20) were identified as the common beliefs of English teachers in Pakistan. Most of these beliefs (denoted with asterisks) or items contain some of those 23 research-based L2 reading goals and developmental directions, referred to earlier; that are recommended by the L2 reading researchers for L2 reading instruction. The 11 identified beliefs are as follows: (1) Developing reading skills of students, especially those majoring in English, is essential in Pakistan, (2)*Teaching explicitly how to read is necessary for the development of all reading skills used in reading, (3)*Helping learners synthesize, evaluate, and selectively use information from texts should be an important goal of reading instruction, (4)*Telling students about the goals for a given reading text or task explicitly is important in order to improve their reading skills, (5)*Sustained silent reading and timed reading must be part of reading instruction, (6)*Assisting students to use reading strategies should be an important goal while teaching texts, (7)*Teaching reading skills in combination with other language skills is important, (8)*Repeated reading improves reading rate, comprehension, and fluency, (9) Knowledge of how comprehension processes work is very essential for teachers, (10)*Helping students develop a large vocabulary must be an important part of reading instruction, (11)*Helping students recognize discourse structure and discourse signaling features is an important reading instructional goal.

This strong agreement of 60% or more teachers suggests that the majority of English teachers in public sector universities in Pakistan, or at least in the six public sector universities, know about relevant developmental directions and goals for L2 reading instruction and they seem to be well aware of the importance these research based suggestions for L2 reading instruction. However, it is important to note that except for the two beliefs in the above list (2 and 3), not a single belief, as reflected in the parallel

practice items; has been found to be practiced even by as few as 30% or more teachers. In reality, this list of beliefs seems to be some kind of wish list of these teachers in that these beliefs have nothing to do with the ways English L2 reading or texts are actually taught in Pakistan. As will be seen in the following paragraphs, if the most preferable way of teaching reading for teachers in Pakistan is to read the text aloud and explain ideas and difficult words in English or in English and a local language, then the above-stated beliefs of these teachers about English L2 reading instruction are nothing more than saying that these are great ideas.

As far as the classroom instructional practices of the majority of the English teachers in the state sponsored universities are concerned, not a single practice was found to be practiced by 60% or more of the teachers using the same criteria used for question 1. But with a reduction in the criteria (to 30% of the teachers), only four practices were found to be practiced “always” or “almost always” by 30% or more teachers. These self-reported practices are as follows: (1) Reading the text aloud to students and explaining the main ideas and difficult words in the text in English, (2) Asking students to read the text orally and monitoring their comprehension by asking them oral questions regularly, (3) Teaching students how to synthesize, evaluate, and selectively use information from texts, and (4) Teaching explicitly all the important skills that are used in reading. Out of these four, the first two practices are what 60% or more teachers practice positively at some level (i.e., always, almost always, and often) and they are typical of the Pakistani context. The third practice also fits the pattern of English teaching in Pakistan as students are expected to write about what they are taught. Keeping in mind this expectation, teachers might have reported using this practice. The fourth practice seems to be somewhat unusual if majority of the teachers actually teach the ways stated in the first two practice statements noted above. However, it is only 30% or more teachers, and not 60% or more, who explicitly teach their students “all the skills that are used in reading.”

All these results indicate that, on the one hand, there is a discrepancy between what a majority of the teachers believe and what they do in the classrooms and, on the other hand, the majority of the English teachers in public sector universities still prefer to use the traditional ways of teaching English, especially reading. In a system of education where the majority of teachers teach in the ways discussed above, it is not surprising to find a majority of the teachers “not” asking their students to read the text silently by giving them a purpose for reading. But, it is an important finding which shows that if the basic requirement of learning to read or becoming a fluent and skilled reader is the act of reading, then the system of education as well as reading instruction in Pakistan lack even the most basic of reading instruction and what is considered to be the most important aspect of developing students’ reading skills. If students are not always or almost always or even often asked to read in class the way students in most parts of the world read, how can they become skilled and proficient readers?

6. Conclusion

In summary, the study attempted to explore the common reading beliefs and classroom instructional practices of English teachers in the public sector universities of Pakistan in order to document these beliefs and practices and present a realistic picture of L2 reading instruction in Pakistan. Generally speaking, a number of important reading instruction ideas have been found to be the common reading beliefs of a majority of English teachers in Pakistan and their preferred classroom practices were identified while teaching reading or English text resources, as much as the current data can be reasonably generalized. The findings of the study are important because (a) if most advanced academic teaching in post-secondary

institutions is carried out with English as the expected medium of instruction, (b) if the text resources read by students are in English, and (c) if the ability to teach and read English L2 texts impacts all post-secondary learning in Pakistan, then they will help concerned stakeholders understand better and improve the situation of English teaching, especially L2 reading instruction in Pakistan.

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